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ABSTRACT

A program to train literacy providers to help empower women was developed with funding from the United Nations Development Program. The training program is based on a manual titled "Educate to Empower." The manual, which is designed to train material developers to prepare gender-sensitive learning kits on various topics related to empowerment, is the culmination of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) experience in conducting regional workshops in Asia and dozens of national workshops on the same theme. The manual guides literacy providers through the process of producing their own learning kits and training others (in a 3-week training program) to produce similar kits. The major components of the training program and manual are gender issues, work skills, and literacy and numeracy. Workshop participants are sensitized to gender issues through individual and group examinations of their own attitudes, values, and beliefs in a nonthreatening environment. Work (especially the practical skills needed by women in individual developing nations) and literacy and numeracy are emphasized throughout the training program because of their importance to women's integrity and sense of self-worth. Workshop participants are also guided through a step-by-step process for translating empowerment into learning materials. (MN).

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By
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Background Document

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Empowerment Can Be Taught: a course in preparing gender-sensitive materials for poor women

by Namtip Aksornkool[1]

Introduction

The empowerment of women - economically, politically and personally - is the essential first step in the battle for eradicating poverty, and creating sustainable livelihoods and healthier communities. Education, particularly through well structured literacy programmes, plays a crucial role in the empowerment of women and thus, in the fulfilment of the above objectives.

Over the past decade, education for women's empowerment has been repeatedly and intensively discussed due to the disappointment over "run of the mill" literacy programmes. The typical literacy activity, limited to the three R's, a handful of income-raising skills, and certain "life-quality" components, can only be considered limited and unsatisfactory as it is rarely relevant to the everyday concerns of the women and therefore offers little to improve their lives and their families'. These programmes centre predominantly on areas predetermined by women's reproductive function as mothers and wives, to the exclusion of their equally important role as economic producers. As a result, women become disillusioned as they realize that the programmes are of no practical value to them.

Poor women are busy women. Not only do they spend a disproportionate amount of time and energy responding to family needs and social expectations of motherhood and women's domestic roles, but they also find themselves up against rigid authoritarian spouse control, violence at home, and unsafe community environments that limit their physical mobility. The increasing impoverishment of women means they have the double responsibility of focusing on income generating activities while simultaneously performing household tasks. Therefore, their time and energy for engaging in literacy programmes is severely limited.

Additionally, mere training on improving productivity is not sufficient as women need to acquire decision-making capacity and the ability to organise and take part in activities at a family, community and national level.

Advocates of education for empowerment have argued that education needs to go well beyond mere "enabling" to have a beneficial effect. Rather, it must view women as active members of society who need education to participate effectively and meaningfully, in any activity, as equal partners of men.

There are many and varied definitions of empowerment but to my mind Paz is most succinct, defining empowerment as " the ability to direct and control one's own life" (Paz,

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1990). The report of the 1991 seminar on the integration of women in development elaborates, stating that empowerment is, "a process in which women gain control over their own lives, knowing and claiming their rights at all levels of society at the national, local and household levels. Self-empowerment means that women gain autonomy, are able to set their own agenda and are fully involved in economic, political and social decision-making processes" (Depthnews, 1992).

In other words, empowerment enables a woman to be aware of and understand what is desirable or adverse about her situation and provides her with the realisation that it is within her capabilities either to change the unfavourable aspects, and/or increase the positive side of her situation.

Empowerment is better defined as a concept than in practical terms, which leaves many questions unanswered. This is all the more true with respect to education for empowerment. How does one educate to empower? How does learning for empowerment differ from other programmes for women? How should learning be structured and how can its impact be measured? In a broader sense of the term, shouldn't empowerment be considered in terms of women alone? Shouldn't it be viewed as a means to improve the quality of life for all and in all aspects of life- education, health, earning, participation in political and cultural life, among others? Last but not least, what are the roles of men in the empowerment of women and, indeed, themselves and ultimately, their society?

Empowering women is at least partially achieved by involving them directly in the planning and implementation of projects that are destined for their use. It is essential that women participate in problem definition, the identification and implementation of concrete solutions, and any assessment of efforts undertaken. The skills gained through a collective, participatory approach to literacy are not only transferable to a variety of social situations, but also allow women to own the process of their own education and therefore see the relevance and benefit in it.

This paper presents and discusses the training programme which is a fundamental part of the UNDP funded project "Expansion of Skills-based Literacy Programmes for Women", or better known as "Educate to Empower" from the title of the manual it produced. The project represents an effort to answer some of the above questions while raising other questions related to education for women's empowerment.

As a manual, *Educate to Empower*(1996) is the culmination of the UNESCO experience over a number of regional workshops in Asia and dozens of national workshops on the same theme. The manual has been tested and proved to give effective guidelines for trainers to train material developers for preparing learning kits on various topics related to empowerment. Its key benefit lies in the fact that each participant then succeeds in:

1. producing his or her own learning kit
2. training others to produce similar kits following the step-by-step guidelines of the training, which ideally should last three weeks

The Training Programme

Between July 1990 and July 1992, five workshops were held, with 20-25 participants in each. The following fourteen countries from Asia and the Pacific were represented: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Japan, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua new Guinea, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.

All countries share a common characteristic; their women are unable to give their best to national development.

Literacy, in its expanded sense of the word, has proved to be a powerful tool for mastering various development activities, especially when programmes produce tangible outcomes such as practical documents that can be used as a reference when making the transition from learning to practice. The curricula and materials created during these workshops help women to develop themselves personally, preparing them to become active members of their families, communities and nations. Each material aims at helping the reader to achieve overall personal development, while clearly showing the notorious double responsibility that women shoulder as economic producers and as mothers and wives.

Encouraging women to engage in empowering literacy activities while they face a critical every day survival is a huge challenge. Poor women rarely enjoy access to education and training, and their daily conditions are not conducive to spending time for personal development. Experience shows that even when directly relevant development training comes to the villages of poor women, it is th[e] men-folk who benefit. The above approach concentrates on imparting knowledge, skills a[nd] attitudes that help women operate as efficient partners of men. It is important to stress th[e] need for collaboration between the sexes and to ensure that empowerment does not finish up by "pitting women against men."

Major Components of Training

1. *Gender issues*

Few literacy programmes are characterized by content that questions gender relations. This subject is a major feature of *Educate to Empower*, introduced and developed during the first week of the workshop. Gender sensitization is an area that is handled with great care as it involves questioning one's own attitudes, values and beliefs - indeed, frequently the very essence of one's own existence.

During the workshop, participants spell out and explain their long-held values concerning the respective roles of women and men within the traditional areas: areas of work assigned to men and women, distribution of access to, and control of, resources, access to and respective ways of earning and spending. Activities are planned to ensure that all opinions are respected so that participants become open to reconsidering both their own values as well as those of their peers.

The nature of the activities also plays an important role in creating a non-threatening climate. Group work in which peer support is clearly present is reassuring to the participants. Moreover, well-timed questions from peers encourage participants to entertain new views without feeling pressured into accepting them.

Training materials are more varied, interesting and appealing than usual as they are intended to induce new ways of thinking and changing attitudes towards everyday situations. Audio-visual materials in particular are most effective for this purpose as they use a more interactive yet indirect approach to present cases in which participants recognize their shortcomings without being directly challenged.

The Impossible Dream, a video produced by the United Nations' information office and UNFPA's video, *Women - Key to the Future*, are two examples of this type of training tool. In *The Impossible Dream*, participants learn about a day in the life of a family that could be their own. They see how the roles are shared between the mother and father and the children and how the family interacts together, from the time they wake up to the time they go to sleep at night. At the end of the video the participants discuss what they have watched within given guidelines led by the facilitator. From this discussion, participants realize what a tremendous load of work both women and girls have in running the household while simultaneously earning income for the family. This video also shows how their contribution is crucial to the well-being of the family.

Video films produced by various countries in the region are also popular and effective although editing is sometimes necessary to make the contents of the video both relevant and to the point.

Other action oriented exercises, such as drawing and the Agree/Disagree game, lead groups to reflect on their beliefs, are fun, and reveal a lot without threatening anyone. Groups have come up with exercise models that intensify the scrutiny of gender issues by assigning a framework of action.

In one case they suggest assigning their future learners to write short dialogues for well-known male and female cartoon characters caught in expressive scenes of conflict, debate or reconciliation. Alternatively, participants could be requested to analyse whether illustrations from selected texts portray women and men in a gender-sensitive manner. At the same time they are asked to propose alternative ways of rendering the illustrations more gender sensitive.

Another example is asking participants to draw a familiar scene of a farm and farmers, without making prior reference to the sex of the farmers. Later, a comparison is made between how many of the drawings contain female farmers and how many portray male farmers. This exercise can be used to initiate discussion about how deep-rooted socii-cultural bias distorts reality - particularly when most people generally admit that women farmers constitute a sizeable part of the farm workforce. Similarly, this exercise can be conducted substituting doctors or engineers for farmers.

Analysis of case studies is one other successful method where participants work in small groups to analyse an example from a selection of real-life news stories available from the local press. The participants discuss various issues emerging from the cases according to given guidelines. Issues may include: *Why and how baby girls can be assets to their parents? Are women capable of learning new agro-technology? Why should women be actively involved in fighting the spread of AIDS? What are women's roles in local and national politics? How can violence against women be avoided? How can women be both good housewives and hold leading political offices? Is it true that boys are born to be superior scientists?*

These case studies present the real-life conditions of women and men while at the same time offering some positive role models for women in different vocational and social areas. The discussions are generally geared towards helping participants question their deeply held views and re-consider their stereotyped position on the two sexes. Peer pressure also helps to stimulate an individual to re-examine her ways, consider new options and adopt or reject them. These workshops have revealed that (enlightened) male participants exert enormous influence on the traditional gender perceptions of other participants. In this regard, it is reminded that, it is equally important - even more important, in fact, to orient men to adopt new attitudes so that they will form a part of the supportive environment in the overall in society regarding the roles of the sexes.

In contrast to other skills, the ability to change gender attitudes takes more time to develop and must be continuously reinforced. Gender issues are therefore interwoven with other activities so as to achieve a more comprehensive and facile treatment of the new concepts.

During the second week, the participants are exposed to the principles of material development focusing on increased gender sensitivity. They discuss, listen to short talks do exercises and research and start redefining the needs assessment of the target group which is undertaken prior to the workshop. Each participant then identifies and set the scope of the learning kit. Throughout this time they are exposed to scientific and technical ways of writing goals and objectives, and developing facilitator guides, learner workbooks and instructional material following the principles of adult learning.

2. Work Skills

Many poor women work outside the home to support their families. While the tasks they perform are exhausting and reap little, if any reward, access to income improves their authority in the home and gives them a greater sense of independence and control over their own lives. Work was the major focus throughout the training programme as it imparts integrity and a sense of belonging.

Experience in Asia and Africa repeatedly shows that educational programmes for women often fail because they do not include training women in lucrative skills (Dighe

1989). Sewing, embroidery, tailoring and handicrafts alone cannot sustain women's interest for long because they are not earning them much income (Lind and Foss, 1990).

Accordingly, the programme has shifted to emphasize skills that women want and most need to know. Most popular among the variety of vocational skills women need to develop are agricultural skills, as confirmed by the needs analysis which was conducted prior to the training.

Examples of practical topics selected by women participants are: planting apple trees (Bhutan), making century eggs for sale (China), integrated farming (Laos), rice planting (Vietnam), selling dried fish (Myanmar), raising pigs (Vietnam and Papua New Guinea), food catering (Papua New Guinea) and brick making (Thailand) and entrepreneurial skills.

However, enhancing women's reproductive skills without lessening their other responsibilities has over burdened women. With this in mind, several curricular materials dwell on promoting sharing of household responsibilities between husband and wife and other family members. In China in particular, there is an emerging trend where men accept more and more of their share of the housework and child care. Reflecting this tendency, in the booklet, *Murderer in your House*, Jifeng can be seen enjoying her hard earned income while her husband reads funny stories to the children. In *Beautiful and Productive Courtyard*, Qiaozhen is shown studying by candlelight as her husband minds their small daughter.

Although some work skills belong in the "feminine" category, the curricular units go well beyond the mere "enabling" functions. The workshops emphasize that in many countries, particularly at this point in time, "unfeminine" skills are necessary for women to cope effectively and pull themselves out of dependency and paucity. Among these skills, the use of technology, particularly in farming tasks, such as water-powered rice pounders, and plumbing, water pump maintenance and heating, is most crucial. After all, these women are motivated. It makes no sense to teach them how to paint little flowers on used bottles when their concern is how to produce a solid and healthy pig!

Furthermore, vocational skills will continue to have little effect unless they are linked to planning, management or entrepreneurial abilities. The new subjects on the learning list include planning, management and entrepreneurial habits. These skills are helpful and easily adaptable to any work area. Building up positive self-image and strengthening of women's self-confidence also receives due attention.

3. Literacy and Numeracy

Literacy and numeracy are often the pre-requisites to other learning in that they facilitate access to information and learning materials. On the other hand, people with some literacy skills but without opportunity to use them tend to lose these skills. A study in Thailand has shown that within three years, a person who just acquired a literacy skill will lose it if he or she does not use it regularly. This has been the case of school age children, who upon leaving school, had acquired some basics in reading and writing.

Without the pressing need for reading and having no access to the reading materials, they tended to relapse into illiteracy. However, these literacy skills are likely to resurface once the youth are old enough to assume responsibilities which require their application, such as in conducting their civic duties: reporting births and deaths, registering marriages, applying for licenses or registrations, among others. From this perspective, literacy and numeracy are seen as having a symbiotic relationship with earning skills and other life skills.

In themselves, literacy and numeracy skills are empowering as they open up avenues to learners, with all various possibilities written words have to offer.

Educate to Empower stresses the importance of literacy and numeracy skills. It attempts to create a balance between these two fundamental life skills. In these materials, care was taken to ensure that the reading booklets, charts, posters and reading passages are closely related to the subject at hand in order to reinforce the practical skills. For example, in a learner workbook, *Apple Tree, Money Tree*, readers read about the Dechen and her husband who have taken up apple farming. The following arithmetic exercise is designed to be relevant to the reading text illustrated on the following page.

4. Sonam carries 8 kg; Denka, 8 kg; Chemi, 9 kg; and Lham, 6 kg. How many kg of apple do they have altogether?

Sonam Denka Chemi Lham

The reading text, complementing the calculation exercise, shows Dechen as a positive role model which might inspire others to undertake similar projects. The last page of the text reads like this.

Now their effort has paid off. People come to visit the orchard. They ask Dechen for advice. Dechen feels good about herself.

The learners read, write and practice arithmetic problems on the subject of apple growing only. The whole unit covers a wide range of activities including, motivating learners to think about improving their apple growing, how to study soil texture an prepare it for apple growing, pit marking and digging, manuring and refilling and marketing of apples. Throughout the unit, the roles of women and men in agriculture is given as much important as the technical and economic and the literacy and numeracy aspects. Throughout the curricular unit, the three components are closely connected -- one reinforcing another. In this way, the unit makes sense to the learners who doubtless perceive the learning activity to be about improving their knowledge and skills on apple growing. At the same time, the learners will have already been exposed to the idea of equal partnership between husbands and wives in farm work. It is also hoped that they will also have seen, from the positive example of Dechen, that women, too, can be effective in running an apple farm. In this way, learners are exposed to an alternative way of dealing with their earning problem and controlling and directing their own activities.

Educate to Empower insists that literacy and numeracy skills are integrated to re-enforce the other work skills and attitudes. For example, in *Better Rice, Better Life*, the reading passage below is being reinforced by the writing exercise in the following page.

Bich told them how she selected . .

1. a rice field which has given high harvest.
2. good bushes from this field.
3. good grains from these bushes.
4. good seeds from these grains.

It is worth pointing out that the exercises move away from the traditional "reading for reading's sake" towards reading and writing to learn about something useful in the learners' work or everyday life. In this case, reading and writing content is exclusively about improving rice quality.

Another unit, *New Weaving Loom*, introduces a modern loom which saves women from chronic back pain. The writing exercises request learners to write down some good and bad points of the old and the new looms. For example:

1. Old looms consume time and labour.
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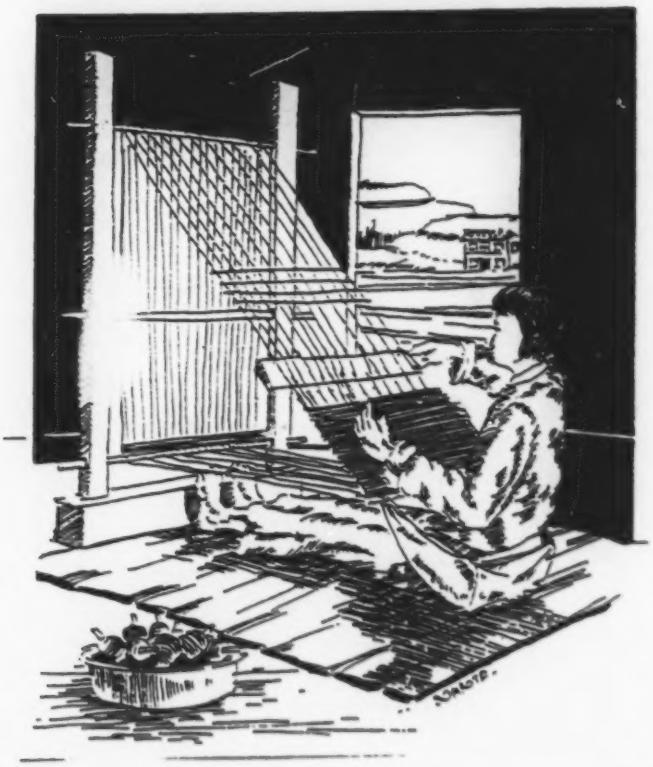
2. Old loom products are unattractive.



Besides using literacy activities to improve women's work skills, the units also use literacy to enhance other practical life skills and attitudes for women. For example, *Getting to Know Me*, is aimed to " raise awareness among learners about themselves, their identity, individuality, and self-worth... and to help them identify parts of themselves they want to keep and those they want to change. To discover ways of effectively doing this... to impart literacy and numeracy skills on related contents."

In order to accomplish these goals, several exercises are given. Here are some examples.

Example:

Things I like

1. Write the names of four people you like.

1. _____ 2._____
3. _____ 4._____

Tell your friends about these people.

2. Write the names of four places you would like to visit.

1._____ 2._____
3._____ 4._____

The objective of this exercise is to help the learners "write about things and people they like and explain why it is important that they express what they like." This is important for poor women who are conditioned into thinking only of other people and living for others to the extent that they forget about themselves.

Activity 1.3

I can build new words with the letters in my name.

For example: Pauline Doonar

<u>New words</u>

line	lane
do	ride
done	pole
rude	Nail

How many words can you make from your names?

Write your name here.

_____

Write new words here.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

The objective of this exercise is to work with learners to " write their names, and make lists of words from their names, and explain why they should be proud of their names."

The next example is about a reading passage which is specially designed to help learners think and explain why it is important for a woman to have some time for herself.

Traditional numeracy materials in general cannot boast a great deal of relevance to adult women's lives. Nor is it carefully designed to be attractive and focused on the "functional" contents . Often seen as the poor cousin of literacy, teaching numeracy skills is rarely written about. When it is, it usually follows the primary school textbooks giving an abstract exercise graded from simple to complex problems. (Hamadache 1989) It is now a well-known fact that people calculate within the peculiar framework of their cultural context. This context must be taken into account.

Contrary to the belief that arithmetic is gender neutral, *Educate to Empower* demonstrates that arithmetic lessons can be as colourful and relevant to the topic and the peculiarities of women's lives in different locales.

Besides basic arithmetic problems of calculating the number of cattle, the length of water pipes, cost of pigs, weight of apples etc, these problems take on another dimension in helping learners to familiarize themselves with various administrative forms such as account sheets for shopkeepers, bank withdrawal slips, filling in stock books, and reading the clock, as well as adding up expenses. They also deal with such fundamental but much needed familiarity with cash!

Educate to Empower promotes the combined treatment of gender issues, work and other life skills and the three R's, through exercises that ask facilitators to employ terms and concepts common to all. When the skills are woven into the fabric, the real life relevance of one reinforces the message of the other.

Translating Empowerment into Learning Materials

The discussion about the desirable qualities of the empowered woman focuses on increasing competency and proficiency as well as changing behavioural attributes. It also implicitly offers a scenario in which the woman sheds the yoke of the numerous social, cultural and economic roles attributed to her.

Educate to empower attaches equal importance to both the productive and reproductive functions of women. Emphasis on one to the exclusion of the other either prevents women from being economically active (thus possessing some degree of independence) or saddles them with additional burdensome responsibilities, or both. Programme developers must ensure that the contents of a programme help women raise their awareness of their own conditions, so that they question these asymmetrical relations in the household and society.

In the final analysis, all the knowledge, skills or attitudes promoted within a programme must be useful in equipping learners to take action towards making the changes which will improve their status in society and lead to their emancipation as well as to mobilize them towards actions which will help them approach equality with men.

During the third and final week of the workshop, participants are requested to use everything they have learned throughout this experience to prepare their own learning kit. To empower each participant, the kit is written individually, although the whole process is conducted and achieved in consultation with background material, fellow participants, and "coaches" or resource people.

The first step is to select the contents of the materials. The participants are by now quite sensitive to the need to emphasize work and promotes women's economic self-reliance. At the same time, they are also careful to view women not only as workers. They feel their material should help women develop as a whole person - with economic autonomy, good health, social recognition, among other desirable characteristics. In selecting the contents, the participants develop their own *Profile of the Empowered Woman,* specifying the bottom line attributes of an empowered woman. These attributes include amongst others: legal literacy, awareness of one's own anatomy and ability to avoid abuse, awareness of rights and responsibilities, awareness of available services, equal appreciation of sons and daughters, continued search for more knowledge and information, ability to act as role models for other women, appreciation of the time she spends at work whether paid or unpaid. The attributes outlined in the *Profile* serve, together with the needs assessment on the target learners, as a basis on which to build the decisions on topic selection. The profile is important because it clearly identifies and demonstrates the qualities desired in women learners. But the profile, alone, does not suffice. The needs and conditions of the women must be considered in conjunction with the *Profile* during the content selection.

At each step of the way, the participants share their work at the plenary session, where comments and suggestions are made for improving the final product. Participants often consult each other in a small group, first, to build their confidence before actually report to the plenary. They also work with their assigned artists who prepare line drawing illustrations of their materials. Care was taken to ensure that the drawings are: culturally realistic, gender-sensitive, and relevant to the text. Participants are also careful to make sure that the functional contents balanced by the literacy and numeracy skills. Furthermore, they need to ensure that all is presented in ways that are free of stereotypes.

Conclusion

As a word, empowerment is overused. As a training approach, it is under-explored. Some people squarely equate education to empowerment. But, empowerment, as we define it, does not come automatically and naturally. To achieve this kind of empowerment, systematic and deliberate intervention in the design and delivery of education is needed. *Educate to Empower* is an attempt at that intervention. It lays down some basics for defining empowerment through creating a composite picture of an empowered woman. Guided by that portrait, and a needs assessment of the target population, it identifies areas of intervention and sets out to prepare learning materials which, together with accompanying delivery methods, might bring about an improvement in one or more of the desirable attributes. In so doing, it recognizes the importance of balancing the three absolute necessities: gender issues, work skills and literacy as well as numeracy skills. It will be a long way before this approach becomes the mainstream practice in literacy and basic education for women. But it is important to recognize that the seed of this approach is sewn and that this seed needs to be nurtured so that it will reap the eventual fruit, which is the active and meaningful participation of women in all spheres of life. This is not only beneficial to the women themselves-but to their families and nations, as well.